The Unwritten History

OF THE

Assassination

OF

Abraham Lincoln

BY

RICHARD MITCHELL SMOOT

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To Judge Daniel Fish of
Minneapolis, Minnesota,
"The Nestor of Lincolniana
Collectors."
From Orra L. Stone
Clinton, Mass.
Nov. 18. 1909.

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FOREWORD

My only desire in issuing this reprint of the late Richard Mitchell Smoot's manuscript of "The Unwritten History of the Assassination of Abraham Lincoln," is that this valuable contribution to the list of Lincolniana may be preserved in a printed form.

The work was originally published for Mr. Smoot by the John Murphy Company of Baltimore, Md., and the first five copies bound by that publishing house were sent to the author for copyright purposes, two of them being forwarded to Washington, D. C., and they are now in the Congressional Library. The other three were presented to personal friends of the author, who, at that time, confidently expected to receive the remainder of the edition from his publishers. Before they could be bound and shipped, however, the great fire of February 7, 1904, destroyed the plant of the John Murphy Company, together with the remaining copies of the entire edition. The author's death followed on

May 8, 1906, and in the interim between the date of the Baltimore fire and his death, no arrangements were made for a re-publication of the work.

The undersigned received the manuscript from the author's daughter, and it is here reprinted without alteration.

ORRA L. STONE.

CLINTON, MASS., November, 1908.

The Unwritten History

OF THE

Assassination of Abraham Lincoln

THE complete history of the plot to abduct and assassinate Abraham Lincoln has never been written, and it probably never will be; for of all who took part in that tragic event only John H. Surratt, whose mother was hung for complicity in that tragic event, alone lives to make of that history a correct recital, and his mouth is closed for personal reasons. Even he owes his life to a fortunate incident, and a chance, which is here written down for the first time, and until this publication known only to himself and R. M. Smoot, who now resides at 922 North 5th street, Fort Smith, Arkansas.* Mr. Smoot was for many years of his life a successful planter in Charles County, Maryland, close to the locality in which John Wilkes Booth took refuge after the commission of his insane act. Mr. Smoot recently disposed of his holdings in Charles County and took up his residence in Fort Smith to spend

*Mr. Smoot died May 8, 1906.

the remainder of his days with his son, who is engaged in business in that city.

Not only does Mr. Smoot know the secret of Surratt's escape from the gallows, but it was he who bargained with him for the sale of the boat in which it was intended to convey Booth and his fellow conspirators across the river Potomac after their flight from Washington on that fatal night when the world was made agape with astonishment, the woes of a nation multiplied many fold, and it was plunged into a sorrow verging on despair.

"So long as there was anyone likely to be injured by a revelation of the secrets I have kept hidden within myself for these forty years and more," said Mr. Smoot to the writer, "I kept my word inviolate, and did no violence to the faith reposed in me; but now, as there are none to be injured by my breaking the long silence, I will add an important bit to that historic event which so shocked the country into a dumb consternation."

And here Mr. Smoot told the following interesting narrative. which explains many things heretofore garbed in impenetrable mystery, and which, if known in the beginning, would have insured the hanging of John H. Surratt, who is now a resident of Baltimore, Maryland, where he has resided for many years.

"At the time of the breaking out of the war," began Mr. Smoot, "I was engaged in farming in Charles County, Maryland, about two miles from the town of Port Tobacco, situated upon a creek of that name which is a branch of the Potomac. When the ravages of war began to take on form, farming became unprofitable, and I was compelled to turn my attention in other directions in order to make a living. I owned a good, large and stout boat, and fell into the way of transporting goods and passengers across the Potomac, and from that occupation to that of running the blockade was but a short step and an inviting one. I was engaged in that hazardous but fascinating undertaking in 1864. In the early part of that year I received a visit from John H. Surratt, who expressed a desire to purchase my boat. He also said that he would have use for two other good boats which, however, must be capable of transporting fifteen persons each rapidly and safely across the Potomac. He was noticeably eager to secure my boat, and incidentally explained his desire to have the boat by saying that it would be needed in an emergency which might arise within a very short time. He also said that if purchased the boat would be immediately removed to a point up King's Creek, which is a branch of the Potomac about ten miles from Port Tobacco, where it was to

be held in readiness for instant use. With reference to the other two boats wanted, Surratt said they were to be stationed at certain unnamed points to meet exigencies which might arise and cause well-laid plans to go astray, and which did arise. I was using my boat, and asked Surratt if he could not do without it for a while; but he declared that if he bought it he would want possession right away, as the need of the boat would be the consequence of an event of unprecedented magnitude in the history of the country, which would startle and astound the entire world. He did not go into any further explanation of the expected event, which I inferred was then in process of incubation, and on the verge of maturity. While Surratt's manner impressed me with the belief that something big was going to happen, I had not the remotest idea that the life of Lincoln was then any more at stake than was the life of any man who was taking active and prominent part in the war, though I was inclined to associate the coming event with a plan to abduct Lincoln, concerning which plan I had heard vague rumors.

"However, after some little time spent in negotiating with Surratt, I finally agreed to sell him the boat for two hundred and fifty dollars, which amount was to be deposited with some third party

who was to be mutually satisfactory, to be paid to me when my boat was put to use. I went with Surratt to the office of Ex-Judge Stone in Port Tobacco. There he placed in the hands of Judge Stone one hundred and twenty-five dollars in trust for me, and Judge Stone became personally responsible for the payment of the balance. Under instructions from Surratt I turned the boat over to Andrew Atzerott, who figured so prominently in the assassination plot, and who then lived in Port Tobacco. He in turn placed the boat in charge of George Bateman, a farmer living in that vicinity. Under direction of Surratt, Bateman took the boat up King's Creek and hid it at a point where it would be convenient for use. From time to time after that I received visits from and had interviews with Atzerott concerning the time when I would be able to collect the money due me for the boat. He talked evasively as to specific dates, but assured me that the boat would be used and that I would get my money. Then followed a three months' interval of silence, during which time I did not see Atzerott at all, nor did I hear anything concerning his movements. I became uneasy, and determined to have a definite understanding with Surratt as to the time for payment, or secure the return of my boat. I went to Port Tobacco, and there unexpectedly ran across

Atzerott, and asked him to fix a date on which I could collect my money. He told me that he had come from Washington the day before, and he thought the boat would be ordered gotten in readiness for a trip across the Potomac in a very short time. He did not enlighten me as to the identity of 'they,' but I presumed he meant Surratt and those associated with him in whatever was taking place. Atzerott casually remarked that a desperate game was to be played, and that he had made arrangements with a man named Hunt to have in readiness three horses at T. B., a little one-horse town in Prince George County about half way between Washington City and the Potomac. These horses were to take the place of three others to be ridden from Washington to that town, should they give out. I inferred from what he said that he and two others contemplated a quick trip from Washington to some point beyond the town named, and that in securing the relay of horses he was simply taking precautionary measures against possible accident. Still, I did not suspect what that ride was to be a sequence to. As I have said, my impression was that an attempt was to be made to capture Lincoln. I never dreamed of there being any intention to kill him.

"I was not satisfied with the information received

from Atzerott regarding payment for my boat, and I determined to see John Surratt himself. I asked Atzerott where Surratt could be found, and he referred me to a Mr. Lloyd who kept a tavern at Surrattville. I went to Mr. Lloyd and enquired of him where I could see John Surratt. He referred me to Surratt's mother, who lived at 541 H street, between Sixth and Seventh streets, Northwest, Washington City. I went to the capital and called upon Mrs. Surratt at her home the Wednesday morning before the assassination. I was met at the door by Miss Annie Surratt, with whom I had a slight acquaintance, and she conducted me into the presence of her mother, who was seated in the parlor. I asked the old lady where I could see her son John. For a moment her face was a study. She really made me uneasy with her penetrating look of inquiry. She evidently was not satisfied with my appearance, for after a brief silence she informed me that she was unable to tell me of the exact whereabouts of her son, or when and where I could see him. I saw that I was under suspicion, and so told her the object of my visit. In an instant her whole demeanor changed. Her face brightened and she extended me a most cordial greeting. She eagerly inquired if the boat was in place and easily accessible, as it might be called into requisition that night.

I informed her what disposition had been made of the boat, and that Bateman was in charge of it. Then she assumed an anxious expression and hurriedly and earnestly importuned me to leave the city at once. She did not vouchsafe me any explanation of her sudden change of disposition, but I inferred that she feared that I had been followed, and that my presence in her house would lead to her arrest as well as my own. She whispered to me that if I would return to the house on Friday I would most likely see John and the boys, and she showed me a letter written by John to a Miss Mitchell, in which he said that he would be in Washington on the following Friday if he possibly could. I never found out who Miss Mitchell was. Neither she nor the letter played any part in the subsequent happenings. I opined that Miss Mitchell was John's sweetheart, and that she had given the letter to Mrs. Surratt after having read it.

"I left Washington, going back to my home, where I remained until the following Friday, when I returned to the capitol, reaching there about half-past nine o'clock at night. I went direct to Mrs. Surratt's. As I approached the house I saw a woman standing on the porch. Her face was so hidden in the capacious depths of a huge sunbonnet that I could not see her features. As I started to

ascend the steps the woman turned abruptly and went into the house, almost closing the door, and at the same time asking: 'Who is it?' I gave my name. The door was quickly reopened, and I was admitted into the presence of Mrs. Surratt. She was in a state of feverish excitement. I asked her if John had returned, and she replied that he had not. She then informed me that she was positive that the boat would be used that night, and that I would get my money in a day or two. She most earnestly besought me to leave the city and not be seen at her house again. Her manner caused me alarm. I felt that a crisis was at hand, and that I was facing some unseen danger. I left the house and went down town, feeling that it was imperative that I should get out of the city in the shortest possible time. I found that the only mode of conveyance out of the city was a stage which left the Long Bridge at ten o'clock. I hurried to the bridge only to find that the stage had gone. Impelled by the earnestness with which Mrs. Surratt had urged me to leave Washington, I determined to walk to Alexandria, eight miles distant, which I did, arriving there about eleven o'clock. I went to the City Hotel, engaged a room and went to bed, more as a matter of precaution than from any desire to get to sleep, for my anxiety had made me very much

awake. I had not been in bed more than fifteen minutes when I heard the clattering of a horse's hoofs, and then followed a low rumbling of voices. Then there was what seemed to be an aimless rushing to and fro on the part of the people, and the symptoms of a sudden and intense excitement were actually palpable. I got up, dressed and went out upon the street. The people seemed to have lost their senses and to be searching for them. All was tumult, and want of direction of purpose. Men laughed, and then the joy changed to subdued anxiety, and they talked in subdued tones. I expected to see Surratt and Atzerott, for the latter's remarks about horses popped into my mind, but they were not to be seen. No one paid any attention to me, and I was glad of it. Everybody became feverish of speech and action. It did not take me long to discover that Lincoln had been assassinated and that Booth was the assassin. Then I understood the significance of Surratt's remark when he said that there was to be an event of unprecedented importance and magnitude take place. I understood why my boat was purchased, and the use it was to be put to. Nervously I waited for the morning to come. There was no sleep for me that night, nor for any one else for that matter. I did not go back to bed. I remained up, hearing what I could, but showing no undue agitation.

"Impelled by curiosity, I went to Washington the next day. I wanted to know all that was to be known concerning the awful tragedy which I felt I had unconsciously contributed to. I naturally expected that my dealings with Surratt and Atzerott, and my visits to the Surratt home would come to light. Like the moth I could not resist the temptation to fly into the flame which might singe me. When I had satisfied my curiosity on the one hand and had my fears calmed on the other by noting that my presence attracted no attention, I essayed to leave the city and return home. I found that the whole city was garrisoned by soldiers, and that I would be unable to get to my home without a pass. Through a gracious fate I encountered a friend who was on good terms with the Secretary of War, and through his influence I secured a pass. I observed that when the pass was issued to me that a memorandum of the occurrence was made lest there should be an aftermath. I quickly secured a horse and buggy and drove to the Long Bridge, where I was halted and myself and pass scrutinized. I thought the soldiers acted as though they were suspicious of me, and intended to hold me over for further examination, but they finally returned me my pass and I crossed the bridge. I lost no time in getting far away from Washington, I can assure

you. There were soldiers everywhere along my route, and I momentarily expected to be halted; but I was not interfered with until I almost reached home, when I was halted by a squad of soldiers who proved unpleasantly curious, and rigidly questioned me as to when I was in Washington, and why, and how I came to get the pass. Their persistency in interrogation caused me to believe that something had been found out concerning my sale of the boat to Surratt, and I began feeling that creepy sensation understandable only to those who have held close communion with it. However, I was allowed to pass on and went to my home where I remained a month. During that time my conduct was about as circumspect as a strict and watchful guard over myself could make it.

"About the end of the month a squad of soldiers marched up to my house and placed me under arrest. I was not surprised, for I was not able to divest myself of the belief that I was suspected of possessing incriminating knowledge. I submitted quietly and without seeking an explanation as to why I was placed in arrest. I was taken to Washington in a boat, and during the trip I was guarded by negro soldiers, which was rather galling to my southern pride. Arriving at Washington, I was taken to the Carroll prison and locked up. There

I found the Ford brothers, who ran the theater in which Lincoln was shot; Dr. Stewart, who lived on the Virginia side of the river at a point where it was intended to cross the river on the way to Richmond with Lincoln, should he be captured, and several others whom I knew. I immediately employed Ex-Judge P. W. Crane, paying him a fee of one hundred dollars for his service.

"I was confined in that prison for ten days. During that time there were no questions put to me, nor was I given any intimation as to the nature of any general or specific charges made against me. I was kept in annoying suspense until the tenth day, when I was released without comment, but with indescribable relief to myself. I afterwards learned from Judge Crane that I was suspected of knowing something concerning the whereabouts of Booth, but that he had convinced the Secretary of War that Booth had crossed the river about twenty miles below my place, and consequently I could not have either aided him on his way nor become possessed of any knowledge relative to his whereabouts. After my release I returned to my home and remained there.

"As a matter of fact, it was the intention of Booth, Atzerott and Herrold, to ride from Washington, after the shooting, to what was known as Lock

Eleven farm, located near where King's Creek crosses the public road in Charles County, there turn their horses loose, and walk to the point on King's Creek where the boat was concealed, and cross the Potomac in it. But when Booth jumped from the theater box, with his never-to-be-forgotten cry of '*Sic semper tyrannis*,' and after he had shot Lincoln, he broke his leg, and it was found necessary to change the route laid for escape, in order to reach the house of Dr. Mudd to have the fracture reduced in the least possible time. The house of Dr. Mudd was located about ten miles north of Port Tobacco, in Charles County. After having his leg set, Booth was secreted in the pines, near Pope's Creek and about two miles from the terminus of the Baltimore and Potomac Railroad, for nine days, waiting for an opportunity to cross the river. You see, during that period the wind was very high, and the only available boat was so small and so frail that Booth and his party were afraid to risk passage in it during the tempestuous weather. The enforced change of plans prevented them getting to where my boat was, and they were so hard pressed that they were compelled to put up with the first boat they found at hand.

"While Booth was thus in hiding, there were twenty thousand soldiers in Charles County search-

ing for him, he having been traced to that section, but he covered his tracks so well, and decoyed so skillfully, that the search was made in the wrong direction of the county, and about nine miles from where he was concealed, which accounts for the temporary futility of the search. When Booth and his party dismounted at Dr. Mudd's house, a man on crutches accompanied by a second party were put in the road to make tracks to decoy the searchers in the wrong direction. The ruse was a successful one. It was known that Booth had broken his leg, and when the crutch-marks, accompanied by imprints of feet, were discovered in the road, the immediate inference was that Booth was on crutches, and that the footprints were those of a man who was accompanying him in his flight, and the soldiers followed the direction of those tracks and, of course, went in the wrong direction, and exactly the opposite to that which Booth and his friends had taken. By the way, when Booth shot Lincoln he had on his person six thousand five hundred dollars in paper money of the United States. It was the purpose of Herrold, Atzerott and himself, to make their way to the seaboard, there board a vessel bound to some country with which the United States had no extradition treaty, and there remain to watch the outcome of the civil war and the general trend of events.

"You will remember that I spoke of three horses which were to be stationed at 'T. B.,' to be used in case the horses ridden from Washington gave out? Well, of course they were not needed. Booth, Herrold and Atzerott rode together, and were to have taken flight together. After the shooting, and Booth's escape from the theater, he and Herrold mounted their horses and rode off together. Atzerott lost his nerve, and instead of accompanying Booth and Herrold, he rode his horse back to the livery stable, left it there, and made his way into Montgomery County, where he was afterwards captured. The horses ridden by Booth and Herrold were turned over to F. A. Robey, who was overseer for Samuel Cox, and he drove them into Zakiah swamp, where he shot them to prevent their being discovered, and thus give a clue to the whereabouts of the two men. Cox was subsequently arrested as a suspect. He had a magnificent farm near Washington which he sold for sixteen thousand dollars in gold, and he told me that he spent every cent of that amount to secure his release and prevent his neck from being cracked. When I was put in Carroll prison, Col. Cox had been there for some time, and he remained there for five months afterwards before he got out.

"Yes, I got my money for my boat. It was paid

me between one and two months after the killing, in the office of Judge Stone in Port Tobacco. Judge Stone was elected to congress from that district in 1868. As I have said, my boat was not used. After the shooting of Lincoln, George Bateman, who had it in his keeping, chopped it to pieces and then burned the wood.

"There are very few people," continued Mr. Smoot, after indulging in a reminiscent mood for a minute or two, "who know how Surratt came to save his neck. His acquittal was due to one of those usually unconsidered trifles which occasionally generate so much force. It happened in this way: The general public was morally sure that Surratt was one of the arch-conspirators, and that he was as guilty of the murder of Lincoln as was Booth who fired the killing shot. There was no doubt in the public mind but what he would be convicted, and expiate his crime on the gallows, and his acquittal was the surprise of the hour. I have always known the character of the influence which so worked to his advantage, and it was this:

"Myself and a number of others, my brother Ned included, were summoned as witnesses for the government at the trial of Surratt. We were taken to a hotel, there to wait until we were sent for by the prosecuting attorney, whose name was Wilson, and

who had charge of the case. We were sent for by him and went to his private office. My brother Ned was the first to be taken into the inner office of Mr. Wilson to be examined. It proved that my brother was not open to conviction. In order to make my brother loosen up, Mr. Wilson informed him that if he would go on the stand and testify for the government, telling all he knew of the plot to either assassinate or abduct Lincoln, he would receive ten dollars a day during his attendance upon the court. I was also examined, but the same proposition was not made me, probably because of my previous arrest and release. As soon as my brother could get away, he went to Attorney Merrick, who was defending Surratt, and told him of the offer made him by Mr. Wilson. Mr. Merrick put that information up his sleeve for use at the trial. At the trial, and when my brother had been examined by Mr. Wilson for the government without divulging anything, he was turned over to Mr. Merrick for cross-examination, and this is about what followed:

"'Have you been offered anything in the shape of reward to induce you to testify for the government?'

"'I have.'

"'What?'

"'Ten dollars a day.'

" 'By whom?'

" 'By Mr. Wilson.'

" 'What Mr. Wilson?'

" 'That man there; the prosecuting attorney,'

" 'Where was the offer made you?'

" 'In his office.'

" 'When?'

" 'The day I arrived here.'

"The prosecuting attorney made no denial, though he did try to remove the impression that he tried to bribe my brother. The effect of my brother's statement upon that jury was almost palpable. Surratt and his friends saw in it the foundation of a strong hope for a disagreement, at least, and the fruition of that hope was an acquittal. My wife's uncle, Columbus Alexander, was a member of that jury, and after the verdict of acquittal had been rendered I asked him if my brother's testimony had anything to do with the acquittal, and he replied that that testimony proved the salvation of Surratt, as it created the impression in the minds of the jury that the government was trying to convict him upon perjured testimony. John Surratt and myself are, perhaps, the only two persons living who were directly and indirectly connected with the killing of Abraham Lincoln, he directly and myself indirectly and without design," concluded Mr. Smoot, as he

heaved a sigh of relief at having unburdened himself of the more than forty-years-pent-up secret which he had been keeping for the safety of others, and which would not be forgotten.